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*CHRISTIAN EXPERIENCE THE KEY TO CHRISTIAN
HISTORY*

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No field of theological study surpasses in interest or in importance the history of the Christian Church. Here is a great complex of institutions and beliefs. Where have these come from? What was it that gave them birth? What is the secret of their persistence and power? What are they worth to mankind? Is there to be found beneath the variant, shifting forms of institution and life, of organization and creed, as they appear in Christian history, any underlying, unifying principle, which can account for their rise and explain their right to be? These questions must be answered. They involve the fundamental problems of the unity of Christian history and of the rationality and worth of institutions and confessions and rituals, which, unless they can thus justify themselves, cannot permanently survive.

It is the purpose of this article to show that there is such a unifying principle of interpretation, and that this principle is to be found in the reality of the Christian experience itself. Behind every movement in the history of the church, behind every institution which she has developed for the expression and perpetuation of her life, behind every doctrine and creed, there stands a human soul which has met God, and in the great silence, unbroken save by the cry of penitence or the exultant note of spiritual conquest, has found the path to peace.

The infinite variety of human life, the varying capacity of mind and heart, must of necessity lead to widely different types, both of religious experience and of its intellectual interpretation. The mystic will be found there, for whom the path of contemplation is the highway to God. The man of action will be there, to whom intercourse with the Infinite is the imperative to service and to the propagation of the faith. The genius of organization will be seen there, intent on incarnating experience in institutions

interpreting and perpetuating the emotions of the heart. Great thinkers will be numbered there, moulding into doctrines and systems of belief their own experiences and those of other men. All these and many other types of heart and mind will bring their offerings of intellectual discernment, or moral enthusiasm, or spiritual appreciation, and lay them upon the altar of the church of God.

Nor will we ever be satisfied with the consideration of these fruits of the Christian experience alone. The ecclesiastical institution, the activities which grow out of the Christian consciousness, the intellectual formulation of the Christian experience in dogmas, or systems of belief—these are in no sense adequate to express the primal experience which gave them birth. Between that experience as their source and the institution, or movement, or belief, which would interpret it, the stream has been polluted by many foreign elements and its course diverted by many a promontory of human interest, until it is hard to realize that behind the tortuous current, with its muddy waters, there ever was a clear spring of Christian experience, born of a soul's contact with God.

If we would ever come to understand the movements of Christian history, we must work our way back through forms and rituals to men, to the heart-throbs of human souls. Only so will the artificial and formal, the irrational, the grotesque, be shot through and through with meaning, as the inadequate interpretation of an experience of God which was itself both adequate and supremely significant. We must have a care never to confuse the interpretation of life with life itself. One is formal and intellectual, the other is vital and spiritual. One is created, the other is creative.

With this summary assertion of the primacy of the Christian experience in the history of the church, let us pass to the consideration of a few illustrations of this truth, drawn from the wide range of spiritual biography. And in the first place let us remind ourselves that the Christian religion began, not as an institution, nor as a ritual, nor as a doctrine or creed, but as an experience, a life, an inspiration. Jesus established no church, organized no system of worship, developed no institution, taught

no essentially new doctrine, wrote no gospel, left behind no constitution or system of laws. The uniqueness and everlasting worth of Jesus for our world rests, and must forever rest, in the fact that he met God face to face in the high, clear altitudes of an unclouded fellowship. His worth for humanity lies deep in his personal experience. "I know Him," he said again and again. The streams of beneficence that flowed from his lips and his life validate the claim. Christianity thus has its roots in the primal experience of Jesus' own soul. As has well been said, "The religious consciousness of Christ is the Holy Place from which gushes forth a living spring to water all future generations." He called other men to share in his consciousness, to drink at his fountain. He called others to him to introduce them to the Father. He did not undertake to institutionalize or intellectualize that experience. That he left to others. Rather did he seek to bring to his followers an experience kindred to his own, that there might be wrought in them the same type of spirit. He was not concerned, if only that were present, about the forms it might assume, or the instruments it would employ for its preservation and propagation in the world.

If we turn now from Jesus himself to those who have been influenced by Jesus, we shall be impressed anew to find, upon every page of Christian history, in the lives of the great, who have left the indelible impress of their personalities upon its manifold developments, or of the humble, who have contributed their littles to the sum-total of Christian achievement, that the basic and formative fact in the lives of all was that they had come to know God. Where shall we find, in the history of the church, three names which in the totality of their genius, the wealth of their creative power, the sweep of their influence, the manifold character of their contributions to Christian life and thought, are comparable to Paul, Augustine, and Luther? These three towering personalities stand, each at the entrance of one of the three great epochs of Christian history, the Ancient, Mediaeval, and Modern, determining in large measure the movements of the succeeding centuries, the intellectual and spiritual problems of those centuries, and the direction, and, to some extent, the form of their solution. It is fair to ask, in view of these facts, Wherein

lies their chief value for the church? Does it lie primarily in the movements to which they gave birth, the institutions which grew out of their thought, the creeds which expressed their religious philosophy, or rather in the creative religious experience which was common to them all?

Paul stands in the front rank of Christian thinkers by his insight into those fundamental problems centering in the revelation of God in Christ that stirred the heart and engaged the mind of the church for centuries, until they were wrought out with hammer and anvil in the early creeds, which, whatever worth they may have for the church today, are an everlasting protest against slipshod, superficial thinking upon the central verities of faith. Whatever it was that Christ meant to Paul, whatever of new insight and content was given to his thought of God, what theories he built to account for the person and work of Jesus, what programme he evolved for the development of the church militant and the consummation of the church triumphant, all these facts and teachings, vastly important as they are, are not to be compared in importance with the fact that, on his way to persecute the church in Damascus, Saul of Tarsus met Jesus of Nazareth and surrendered to his sovereignty. "Christ liveth in me"—that was henceforth the overmastering consciousness of the apostle. Out of it came the answer to every doubt and difficulty, both intellectual and spiritual. Upon that rock was built the temple of his faith and the fortress of his belief. With the profound conviction, "I know Him whom I have believed," he went forth to evangelize the world and to establish the church. McGiffert is right when he says, "We can neither understand Paul the Christian nor Paul the theologian, unless we appreciate that experience and give it its true value. It marks him as one of the great religious geniuses of history."

What is true of Paul is equally true of his spiritual disciple. Augustine stands at the threshold of the Middle Ages. Their spirit is his. Their institutions are the legitimate offspring of his mind and heart. Monasticism, mysticism, scholasticism, papacy! To name these mighty movements, which gripped the life and moulded the institutions of the church through a period of a thousand years, is, in a large degree, to take the measure of

this man, who projects his personality across the Christian centuries. Unquestionably he gave direction to the ideals and furnished the mould for the shaping of the institutions of that complex age. His writings are the quarries from which master workmen shaped the stones they built into the structure of mediaeval thought. Upon his *City of God* the papacy built its claims to world-sovereignty. The subtlety of his genius and the dialectic quality of his mind paved the way for scholasticism. He was a monk and a mystic combined, and contributed to the growth of both monasticism and mysticism. As a theologian he wrestled with some of the knottiest and most unyielding problems of Christian thought, determining the form of trinitarian teaching in the west, by his emphasis on sin and grace opening a new chapter in Christian thinking and paving the way for the religious awakening of the sixteenth century. Upon the roll of the great, who, from the close of the Apostolic Age to the present, have devoted their intellectual acumen to the interpretation of Christianity, the name of Augustine stands first, the master mind of the centuries, belonging to no one age or church, though claimed by both Catholic and Protestant—a teacher of the church universal.

Yet when we have done full homage to the intellectual and moral power that have shaped the thought of Western Christianity, we must not forget how much of that which he wrought, and of what was wrought out of him, has been outgrown, as the church of these later days has built for herself more stately and enduring institutions and beliefs. The papacy has been rejected as an institution by a considerable portion of the Christian world. The gate of the monastery has swung outward, ever since the monk of Wittenberg reopened the path for religion, out into the world of life and work. Scholasticism has given way to modern science and modern philosophy. Even the central teachings of Augustine, persistent and fruitful as they have been in the theology of the church, have experienced inevitable modifications with the progress of Christian thought.

Wherein, then, in view of the diminishing value which these later centuries have put on the greatest achievements of his genius, lies the supreme worth of this saint and theologian of the fifth century for us today? There can be but one answer. The

ultimate fact out of which all else came, and back to which all else must go, to be judged for its worth, was Augustine's personal religious experience. Not so much in his *City of God* or in his controversial writings directed against Donatists and Pelagians, not so much in his constructive theological works, *On the Trinity* and the *Enchiridion*, as in his *Confessions*, in the early centuries the finest fruitage of a deep and vital spiritual life, must be sought the secret of his charm and the power of his influence over the heart of the church. His greatness as well as his limitations as a thinker are to be traced to the fact that he walked in the footsteps of philosophers and theologians. His greatness as a man and as a Christian is to be traced to the fact that he met God and walked with him.

To understand this, we must turn from the arena of hot debate, from sound of hammer, where theological doctrines are in process of construction, to the drama of the man's inner life. Somewhere in the experience of every great soul there is a garden of Gethsemane, where the victory over self is won. Augustine's Gethsemane was a garden in the city of Milan, where the battle was fought with passions which had enfeebled his will and made him a yielding, though rebellious, slave. Within the corridors of his soul two spirits grappled in a death embrace, the spirit of the man and of the beast. There is the mighty conflict, the prayer for help, the divine command, "Put ye on the Lord Jesus Christ," the response of obedience. Augustine leaves his garden to fight his battle through to ultimate victory. No one will question, who has fathomed the depths of his life, that that day of conflict gave direction and motive power to all his later activities. The marks of that battle he carried to his death. It was the point of departure and the creative inspiration in his thought. It determined his theology. It made of him a mystic and a monk. In all his writings there is constant appeal to this primal experience.

Nor can we say less than this of Luther, as he stands at the portal of the modern age, gathering up into himself the protests of many minds against the corruptions of the papacy. In him there meet and mingle the hopes and aspirations of multitudes who long to slake their thirst at the springs of pure religion, un-

defiled by the contaminations of priestcraft and the corruptions of false doctrine, the heritage of the Middle Ages. He sounds the bugle-call which stirs consciences and crystallizes thought. The Reformation is born. A new church comes into being, its ritual and laws, its organization and doctrine, echoing the mind and heart of him who gave the movement birth. Look at its polity, and you find the indelible impress of Luther's mind. Examine its Confessions of Faith, and you discover the formal organization of Luther's great ideas. Consider its spirit, and you look into the mirror of Luther's own soul, with its religious fervor and its inherited conservatism. The past few months have produced two notable lives of the great reformer, which have added materially to our knowledge of the man and of the spirit that was in him. Like every truly great soul, the personality of Luther only grows the greater with the flight of the years. We see his faults and note his limitations. He says things that grate upon the finer sensibilities of an age which without him had not been. Sometimes he battles for beliefs which the church has since refused to accept as adequate to her faith. He did all this, and more. Yet when all has been said that can be said, the figure of Luther assumes ever more heroic proportions as we see him across the years. To have shaken the throne of the papacy, broken the bondage of mediaeval institutions and doctrines, and opened the flood-gates of new intellectual and spiritual life; to have created a new church, and given her the weapons of offence and defence; to have sent forth wave after wave of influence to break in light upon western Europe—these mark him as one of the creative geniuses of history.

We ask for the source of that power which went forth from him into the world of thought and action. He wrote many books, stirring the conscience and informing the mind of Germany. Yet the secret of his power was not in his pen. He taught throngs of students, who became ardent disciples and propagators of his message. But his strength did not lie primarily in academic halls. He was the friend and confidant of princes; kings sought his favor and counsel. Yet his greatness was not that of the statesman and politician. Behind all these gifts of his many-sided genius; behind his varied powers, as teacher, preacher, author,

statesman, counsellor, behind all these, and as the inspiration of them all, without which they had never become effective forces for the achievement of his life's great task, lies one, fundamental, never-to-be-forgotten fact. Luther had met God, and that meeting transformed the monk in the Augustinian cloister in Wittenberg into the herald of the Protestant Reformation. Within his own bosom, as has well been said, "we discover the shaping of the whole movement with which his name is associated in history. . . . Its deepest and most intrinsic elements, indeed the very order of its development," we find "rehearsed in the workings of this man's soul, in the quiet of Erfurt and Wittenberg, before he had thought of breaking with the church, or had dreamed of inaugurating a spiritual revolution." Indeed, the Reformation in Germany was the spiritual biography of Luther writ large, a spiritual experience materialized in institutions and intellectualized in confessions.

We follow the evolution of his soul, from the time he leaves the quiet home in Eisleben till he becomes the observed of all observers in Europe. And the thing that most impresses us is this, that within the heart of this man, in the great silence, is being wrought out the problem of the relation of a human soul to God. There is a growing consciousness of God's holiness, so high as never to be scaled by the ladders of institutional religion; a sense of sin so deep as to be unfathomed by the plummet of any human excellence; a consciousness of alienation so wide as to be unspanned by any bridge built by the soul's noblest efforts. Through storm and stress to peace! From darkness to light! Such is the story of Luther's own experience. Nor did peace and light come at last till love had sounded the deeps of sin, and faith had spanned the chasm from man's need to the infinite mercy and grace of God; "The just shall live by faith." Such, in brief, was the religious experience of Luther. The reformation thus begun made the Reformation possible. With undimmed vision and unclouded certitude, the great leader consecrated his powers to make real for others, in a redeemed life and a transformed church, the central realities of his own soul.

So much, then, for the primacy of Christian experience in the life and work of these three epoch-making personalities of Chris-

tian history. If now we turn for a moment to the more specific problem of the development of Christian doctrine, we shall be impressed with the same fact. There is a tendency today, both within and without the church, to decry creeds and dogmas as useless bits of worn-out intellectual machinery, to be cast upon the scrap-heap of the centuries. If that is what they are, then that is where they belong. The sooner we rid ourselves of them, the better. But we are not ready to consent to such a judgment. Creeds and dogmas are the religious experiences of human hearts, intellectualized, formulated, and evaluated. They are the judgments of meaning which the mind puts upon feelings too deep for words. Back within the shadow, behind every formulation of doctrine which has taken hold of the mind and conscience of the church, are human hearts which have held converse with the Eternal, and in the wonder of it have sought to interpret to their fellows what eye hath not seen nor ear heard, but which has entered into the heart of man with the grace of the Evangel.

I can illustrate my meaning in no better way than to refer to a single great doctrine, than which none other, except it be the Person of Christ, has been esteemed so pregnant with worth for the life of the Christian church. I mean the doctrine of the Atonement. Like some mediaeval cathedral, spanning the centuries in its growth, upon which many men of many minds have labored, nor always with the same plan, building and rebuilding, casting up a buttress here, opening a window there, whence new light might shine upon the altar of the "lamb slain from the foundation of the world," so stands this central teaching of the church, the building incomplete, waiting the reverent thought of future generations; perhaps never to be finished on earth, from man's finite incapacity for the full thought of the Infinite.

Among the builders was Anselm of Canterbury, the first in the history of Christian theology formally to define this doctrine. "He first compelled men to look at it, and to study it, and to see the Evangel in it." The theory of the atonement which he built has not proved altogether adequate to the growing thought of the church. The question of a measureless guilt demanding a measureless satisfaction, to be applied to man's need by processes neither wholly rational nor wholly moral, has given place to con-

ceptions more fundamental in character and more in accord with our growing appreciation of the character of God. However much his views still influence the thought of the church, we cannot express ourselves today in the terms of Anselm. The intervening centuries have brought us nearer, we believe, to an understanding of the mind and heart of God. The value of Anselm's theory of the atonement for us lies, not in the adequacy of his religious philosophy, but rather in the adequacy of his experience of the redemptive power of Christ to which his philosophy attempts to give utterance. Behind the theory stands a great soul in touch with God, finding its highest satisfaction, forgiveness, peace, and power in that divine fellowship. Religion, rather than speculation, was fundamental in his life. His central interest lies here, as is revealed in his letters and meditations. His deepest satisfaction was in that which had been wrought within his own soul. The play of his keen intellect over these experiences of the heart had as its one end their illumination, both for himself and others.

What is true of Anselm is true of every other great Christian thinker who has reverently approached this central problem of the Christian faith. Aside from the offering of the mind which each has brought to its solution, this is their great worth, that each speaks a message out of his own heart of the forgiving grace of God. Intellectual interpretations of the atonement change from age to age, but the experience of the atonement, as it came to Christian on the way to the Celestial City, will never change. "So I saw in my dream, that just as Christian came up to the cross, his burden loosed from off his shoulders, and fell from off his back, and began to tumble, and so continued to do, till it came to the mouth of the sepulchre, where it fell in, and I saw it no more."

The greatest value, then, of dogmas and systems of belief, is not so much in what they say as in what they do not say, in what they imply of thoughts and feelings too deep for words. They are revelations of human souls, and as such are to be given due measure of appreciation.

The past has, moreover, bequeathed to us its heritage of beliefs and institutions which appear meaningless in the light of

present-day Christian thought, or else outgrown in the progressive unfolding of the Christian consciousness. Protestantism is repelled, for instance, by that exaggerated veneration of the Virgin Mary which prevailed in mediaeval Christianity. It has little sympathy for the institution of monasticism, which was one of the strong pillars of the church in the Middle Ages. If, however, we should approach these and kindred doctrines from the standpoint of their origins, and could enter into the spirit of those who gave them birth, we would find that they were prompted by the same needs which are today the foundation facts of Christianity.

If the church had remained true to the primitive conception of her Master as of one who, whatever his origin, had yet lived a veritable human life, with the limitations of humanity, its joys and sorrows, its privations and toils, its temptations and achievements, the worship of the Virgin Mary would never have had so great a place in the church. It was because theology took him from the haunts of men and exalted him to a position far removed from the conditions of humanity, clothing him in the mystic glory of eternity, that the human heart rebelled, and in the place of the Jesus whom it had lost found satisfaction for its craving in the compassion of the Virgin. Protestantism has sought with sympathy and sincerity to find again the Christ who "is touched with the feelings of our infirmities," and to restore him to the heart of the church. In so doing, the church has unquestionably arrived at a truer conception of her faith. We should never forget, however, that this very achievement of Protestantism bears forceful testimony to the fundamental worth of that cruder experience unconsciously protesting against ecclesiastical dogma and voicing the common need of the heart for sympathy and love.

O Saul, it shall be a Face like my face that receives thee;
A Man like to me thou shalt love and be loved by, forever;
A Hand like this hand shall throw open the gates of new life to thee!
See the Christ stand!

The presence of the primal Christian experience in doctrines which no longer adequately express the content of the Christian

life is equally apparent in institutions once useful, but today outgrown. It requires no great insight to criticise monasticism, for example. Its flight from the labors and duties and joys of life, the extravagances of asceticism, the immorality which it sometimes sheltered—these and many other points of attack it offers to the critical spirit of our age. Yet it may be reasonably asked whether in monasticism, as illustrated in its noblest representatives, a Gregory or a Bernard, an Aquinas or a Savonarola, there is not expressed a Christian experience which is vital and essential, the mastery of the flesh by the spirit, the protest of the soul against enslavement to the material interests of life. And it may also be asked whether there is not something of permanent worth in that experience which we are in serious danger of losing in our easy-going, pleasure-loving, luxury-fostering age. It is easy to see how institutions, once the incarnations of a living spirit, crumble and pass away. But the imperative need that the Christian experience shall embody itself in institutions will never pass away. It is fundamental; for life must create for itself the instruments of its expression.

We might leave the subject at this point, were it not for certain practical reflections which grow out of the consideration of this theme. What has been said must not be taken as depreciating in the least the task of the theologian, of taking the raw material of Christian experience, defining it, systematizing it, and giving expression to it. Next to the imperative of the Christian experience itself, no need can be greater than that of adequately interpreting it to the minds of men. Theologies may pass away, but theology never. New experiences teach new truths, and old ones are seen in new lights and assume new significance. As long as this is so, new theologies will be propounded for each new age with its increment of truth, for each new life with its increment of experience. Only we must discover how to use these creatures of the mind, and how to re-create them when the need demands.

The second reflection is set forth in the closing words of Sabatier's *Religions of Authority and the Religion of the Spirit*, where he says, summing up his argument in that illuminating book: "The labor of philosophical reflection is nevertheless not the

essential thing in the order of the Christian life. . . . There is something more urgent, more necessary, than to explain the experiences of piety, and that is to create them." If the Christian experience is fundamental in the history of Christianity, it follows that the first business of the church is the creation of that experience; its creation, I repeat, not its embodiment in institutions nor its interpretation in terms of thought. Religion is primary. All else is secondary. The first great task of the church of Christ is to lead the souls of men into the presence of God and of eternal realities. It is to lead them into the presence of Jesus, to teach them to see with his eyes, to hear with his ears, to understand with his mind, to feel with his heart the divine interpretation of the meaning of life. There, and there only, will be born the reverent and holy fear, the sublime assurance, the power of faith and hope and love from which flow the streams of spiritual refreshment.

It sometimes seems as though the church were more vitally interested in the science of religion than in religion itself; in the task of criticism and historical interpretation than in the creation of the Christian experience. This ought she to do, but not to leave the other undone. For of what vital worth are her scientific interpretations, if with them there is not born that consciousness of God which makes sacred the ground on which we stand; the sense of sin that humbles, and of grace that exalts, of faith that sends us out with joy into the Promised Land of work, of love that unlocks the treasure-house of life? We need all the light which historical criticism can cast upon the Psalms and Prophets. But more than that we need the experience of God, from which the soul itself springs into song, voicing its needs and its satisfactions in cadences that pulsate with life and power; the experience of God from which the spirit of prophecy awakes, heartening the souls of men for deeds of heroic achievement in righteousness.

Whatever other varied tasks belong to the Christian ministry and the Christian church, these two are central and paramount—first of all the creation, afterwards the interpretation, of the primal Christian experience.